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SUBJECT: CHANGES IN THE FORTUNES OF ONE CHURCH REFLECT CHANGES IN VIETNAM

REF: HCMC 811

HO CHI MIN 00001279 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The story of the United World Mission Church (UWMC) is a microcosm the changes that have gripped Vietnam in the more than 32 years since the end of the war. The church went underground but survived as the direct persecution and police scare campaigns of the late 1970's progressed to property confiscations in the 1980's. While the situation improved once the 1986 "doi moi" reforms brought liberalization, the best the church's leader could say about the 1990's is that his church was unofficially tolerated and harassed less often than in the 1980's. Since the passage of the law on religious freedom in 2004, however, the once glacial pace of change has speeded up considerably. The UWMC now has full legal status and an elected Executive Council formally recognized by the GVN. After decades of training preachers in underground schools or sneaking them abroad, the UWMC graduated 75 new preachers from its Danang training center in 2007; 150 more will graduate in 2008. Plans are afoot for a new church to accommodate 1,500 worshipers at once and a new national headquarters building. Perhaps most surprising of all, the same local police station that once meted out harassment now keeps cordial relations with the UWMC's central church, going so far this year as to organized a special Yuletide dinner at which the pastor was invited to give the benediction. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) During a December 18 meeting at his home in Danang, Pastor Toi of the United World Mission Church (UWMC) of Vietnam provided an illuminating personal perspective on the progress of religious freedom since 1975. Immediately after reunification, security agents told everyone that even though the U.S. had pulled out of Vietnam, they left behind their CIA agents in the form of Protestant pastors. While all Protestants were suspect, Pastor Toi says that the UWMC was singled out for particularly harsh treatment. Many pastors were sent to reeducation camps and all pastors found themselves totally isolated from their congregations since people feared retribution from security police if they were seen talking to a preacher. Pastor Toi, like many other religious and business figures, "voluntarily" donated most church property to the GVN. Among the donated properties were a large hospital located on 20 hectares (50 acres) of land, a school on 2 hectares (5 acres) and smaller properties. As part of his understanding with the new government, the UWMC kept its main church in Danang.

¶3. (SBU) In 1983, roughly three-quarters of the property of the main UWMC church in Danang was confiscated by provincial officials and six families were moved into the former church. The justification given was that the church was not being used. Pastor Toi points out that while the rationale was true, it was

only true because UWMC members could only meet in secret due to fear of police reprisals. Public religious worship was illegal.

At roughly the same time his church was divided up, other leading UWMC pastors were ejected from their parsonages so Pastor Toi had to partition his own home to make room for additional families. In his tiny remodeled living space, the former entry way became the living and dining area while the former bathroom became the sole bedroom. His home retains this form to this day.

14. (SBU) After the start of Doi Moi in 1986 and particularly in the early 1990's the situation improved and UWMC members could once again meet openly, although still only unofficially. On more than one occasion, police prevented services from taking place, sometimes by blocking access and sometimes by summoning the pastor to a meeting. Several times, police summoned Pastor Toi to meetings at the same time that major celebrations such as Christmas services were scheduled to take place. The police never had anything in particular to discuss; they just wanted to disrupt services.

15. (SBU) After the passage of the new law on religious freedom in 2004, the situation began to improve. While it was initially very difficult to register churches and meeting points, as both Pastor Toi and local governments became more familiar with registration procedures, the process quickened. By July of 2007 (when Pastor Toi first met the new CG), many registrations were being processed in only two weeks (reftel). While many others took longer, Pastor Toi and the other pastors from UWMC were clearly learning to work the system and had found that central and provincial authorities from the Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) were willing to play an active, supportive role.

16. (SBU) In September 2007, the UWMC held its first nation-wide conference since the end of the war, electing an 11-member executive council that includes roughly equal numbers of pastors from three generations: the pre-1975 generation, the generation of pastors who began their service in the "underground" congregations of the UWMC from 1975 to 2004, and new pastors who

HO CHI MIN 00001279 002.2 OF 002

graduated from the UWMC's first officially-approved five-month training program in July 2007. While Pastor Toi was told not to invite foreign observers to the September general conference, several showed up anyway. Pastor Toi said that those foreigners who did come were given a warm reception both by the church and by local officials and wound up going away deeply impressed by what they had seen.

17. (SBU) After years of having to run to Hanoi or to the People's Committee office for all types of permission slips and official paperwork, Pastor Toi was all set to head to Hanoi once again to accept his denomination's official national registration certificate on October 24, 2007. He was therefore pleasantly surprised to receive a call from the CRA telling him that he did not need to travel; the CRA would send someone to bring the certificate to him. When the denomination was given "legal person" status (allowing it to officially own property and engage in legally-binding transactions just as a corporation or NGO can), the CRA once again sent someone down from Hanoi. While small, these changes reflect a fundamental change in attitude toward religion.

18. (SBU) Pastor Toi commented that perhaps his experience this Christmas season best summed up the changes that have occurred in Vietnam. This year, he once again received a call from the local police. Unlike the dark years of the 1980's when they called to harass him or disrupt Christmas services, however, this year they called to invite him to a special dinner in honor of the Christmas season -- a dinner hosted by the police at which Pastor Toi would be invited to say the blessing.

MORE WORK TO BE DONE

19. (SBU) While Pastor Toi credits the will of God (and not the GVN) for the changes that have occurred, he is actively pressing

the GVN to make more changes. Church registrations are easier but there are still problems to be resolved, particularly in some provinces in the north eastern part of the country. Even though he never donated the UWMC's central facility to the GVN and it is therefore officially considered to be "borrowed" rather than owned by the GVN, he has been told that in order to reclaim the church property the church itself -- and not the GVN -- must first directly compensate the six families and one brewery that now occupy former church land. All six families have made it clear that their compensation price will be very high. The brewery has announced plans to relocate and sell its facility on Danang's red hot real estate market.

¶10. (SBU) Having trained 75 new pastors last year, the UWMC plans to train 150 more in 2008 while simultaneously upgrading a number of "meeting points" into fully recognized churches. Now that the UWMC has full legal rights, Pastor Toi is planning to sue for property restitution rather than simply request it. At the same time, he is filing an application for a 10,000 square plot of land as compensation for seized properties. He already has plans drawn up for the new 1,500 seat church, bible school, dormitories and UWMC headquarters he plans to build there.

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